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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2568  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2433  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3023  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3295

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000162

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: FOREIGN MINISTER PROVIDES POSITIVE  
OUTLOOK FOR U.S.-TURKMEN BILATERAL RELATIONS

REF: ASHGABAT 152

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. On February 2, the Charge met with the Foreign Minister, Rashid Meredov, to discuss a list of pending bilateral issues, including the present imbroglio over the diplomatic bags. The Foreign Minister took the opportunity to recap 2008 achievements in the bilateral relationship, singling out the impetus generated by the Bush-Berdimuhamedov meeting in Bucharest. He more than once mentioned the Turkmen government's desire to see a White House visit by President Berdimuhamedov during 2009, perhaps in conjunction with a meeting of the U.S.-Turkmenistan Business Council. FM Meredov expressed interest in the new Administration's foreign policy priorities, especially Afghanistan, and would welcome a visit by Special Representative Holbrooke. The Charge raised a number of human rights concerns -- allowing ICRC prison visits, status of political prisoners, and registration of NGOs and religious groups. FM Meredov advocated gradual engagement with ICRC, showed no inclination towards leniency for those who break the law, and was noncommittal on registration of NGOs and religious groups. END SUMMARY.

FM: BILATERAL RELATIONS DEVELOPING IN POSITIVE DIRECTION

12. (C) FM Meredov began by noting that the meeting was an opportunity to exchange opinions on a range of issues. He characterized 2008 as a year during which relations between the United States and Turkmenistan became more active, following the impetus given by the meeting between President Berdimuhamedov and former President Bush. He noted that political relations became closer as the result of visits by State Department delegations. Security assistance also developed, with military delegations including the visit of a Deputy Minister of Defense to the United States. Overall, FM Meredov thought relations were developing in a positive direction, and he looked forward to further developments in the areas of economics, energy, security (he emphasized counter-narcotics activities) and in the cultural/humanitarian sphere. He noted that the MFA is actively involved in maintaining relations between our countries, saying the MFA supports nearly all the Embassy's initiatives. "U.S. proposals are realistic and reflect an

understanding of conditions in Turkmenistan."

#### ECONOMIC RELATIONS NEED NEW IMPETUS: BUSINESS COUNCIL

¶3. (C) In the area of economic relations, FM Meredov said ties consist largely of trade relations, particularly aircraft and agricultural machinery. While he expected these ties would continue, in his view, it was time for a new impetus to economic relations in the form of a meeting of the U.S.-Turkmenistan Business Council. FM Meredov said he'd been in contact with the Council, and that there was "a need to gather the Council together and have a meeting." While not certain about when and where to best convene the group, he wanted it to be "on the agenda" in 2009. Representatives from Council member companies had offered to conduct a meeting in the U.S. The Foreign Minister said that if a Berdimuhamedov visit to the U.S. would be possible, that would be a logical time for the first Council meeting.

¶4. (C) In the areas of cultural and humanitarian cooperation, FM Meredov commented favorably on the implementation of our science education program, as well as various seminars and workshops. Concerning the registration of the international school in Ashgabat, he mentioned that the MFA had been working on the issue, but then the tempo had fallen off. He was confident that the matter would be resolved. The Foreign Minister praised the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, saying that the program showed that the Embassy is working to preserve Turkmen cultural objects. He welcomed participation in this program during 2009.

ASHGABAT 00000162 002 OF 003

#### 2009 PRIORITY: U.S. VISIT FOR BERDIMUHAMEDOV

¶5. (C) Looking ahead to 2009, FM Meredov stated that the Turkmen government would like to see a trip to the U.S. organized for President Berdimuhamedov. Such a visit, which is "on the (Turkmen) agenda for 2009," would elevate and give impetus to bilateral political relations. In the area of security assistance, the Turkmen government would continue its cooperation in the areas of border security, counternarcotics trafficking and drug demand reduction.

#### FM'S INTEREST IN NEW U.S. FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

¶6. (C) The Foreign Minister remarked that, while he had seen the general priorities of the new U.S. Administration's foreign policy described in the media, he would welcome more details. The Charge mentioned the Administration's greater focus on Afghanistan, as evidenced by Richard Holbrooke's appointment as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. FM Meredov commented that Holbrooke is a very experienced diplomat and said that after his initial visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan, he could usefully return for a broader visit within the region. He thought it would be a good idea for Holbrooke to visit Turkmenistan, given that it is Afghanistan's neighbor. More generally, the Charge mentioned that State Department officials dealing with Turkmenistan and Central Asia remained in place for the time being. Concerning the appointment of a U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Meredov said he understood that the appointment fell at a time of change of administrations and that final approval needed Senate action. "We will work with you," he offered.

#### NO LENIENCY FOR LAW BREAKERS

¶7. (C) The Charge then raised a number of human rights issues with the Foreign Minister. He mentioned the cases of detained political prisoners Mukhametkuli Aimuradov and Batyr Berdiev. FM Meredov responded that these are people who committed serious crimes and were punished according to the law. "If a person commits a crime, he must be punished." The Charge suggested that, apart from the imprisonment issue, the lack of information about their health and treatment is

of great concern to their families and to those concerned with human rights issues in the United States and elsewhere in the world. This situation could be improved, said the Charge, by allowing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to conduct prison inspections. FM Meredov said the Turkmen government has been in discussions with the ICRC, but the ICRC's insistence on meeting with prisoners one-on-one has been a point of contention. The government wanted its representative to be present at meetings with prisoners, arguing that it is a sign of reciprocal confidence and trust to include them. FM Meredov said the ICRC had conducted a seminar for prison, law enforcement and judicial officials in November last year, and that such activities were part of step-by-step confidence building process. In his view, cooperation with the ICRC did not have to begin immediately with prison visits. The Foreign Minister briefly described Turkmenistan's loan of two helicopters to the ICRC for emergency relief following an earthquake in Pakistan. After several months of service, one of the helicopters crashed in Afghanistan en route home to Turkmenistan. U.S. forces eventually located the crash after five months and recovered the crew remains for Turkmen authorities.

#### NONCOMMITTAL ON REGISTRATIONS

¶8. (C) The Charge also raised the cases of several churches and non-governmental organizations that have not been able to register. FM Meredov said he was aware of our recommendations and would look into this.

¶9. (C) On the issue of permitting the Embassy to operate a

ASHGABAT 00000162 003 OF 003

surveillance detection team to supplement Embassy security, the Foreign Minister said the disbanded SD team had been setup without informing the government. Turkmen law has provisions about who can conduct surveillance operations. For the Turkmen, the lack of agreement in advance, and the implied failure to respect the government, were unpleasant. Also, there were cases of average people being stopped and questioned by the SD teams, which was unacceptable. FM Meredov said that Turkmenistan is a "friendly country" and will do everything for Embassy security, but the Embassy needs to consult with the government first before engaging in such operations.

#### FM WILL LOOK INTO DIPLOMATIC BAGS ISSUE

¶10. (C) The Charge raised the issue of the the Turkmen Customs Department's recent insistence on diplomatic notes in order for the Embassy to receive and dispatch its diplomatic bags. He noted that he had informed Washington and the issue was being reviewed by the State Department as a possible violation of the Vienna Convention as interference with diplomatic bags. FM Meredov said he would go over the issue with his Protocol Department today. He added that the Turkmen government would not want to violate an international convention.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: The Charge pressed the issue of the diplomatic bags very strenuously and urged a quick resolution of the problem. The Minister seemed to understand the seriousness of the matter. END COMMENT.

¶12. (C) The Charge urged the resumption of the refueling operation at Ashgabat airport for U.S. humanitarian flights en route to Afghanistan. The operation has been interrupted pending Turkmen authorization to complete needed repairs. (Note: General Petraeus raised this issue with President Berdimuhamedov and Deputy Chairman for Foreign Relations Meredov during his recent visit to Ashgabat. End Note) The Foreign Minister said his Ministry is now working on the issue.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: While appearing open and friendly, FM Meredov's willingness to engage was more evident in areas

that touched on external affairs, less so in the area of human rights. It was clear the Foreign Minister's priority item was to promote a visit by Berdimuhamedov to the United States this year. He also seemed satisfied with and appreciative of U.S. assistance in the security and cultural areas. As we've heard before, he would like to see more activity in trade and economic relations. While he was clearly familiar with the human rights issues, he showed little flexibility. He did, however, leave the door open to progress on the registration of some organizations, together with gradually increasing engagement with the ICRC. There will be several opportunities in coming months to gauge the government's intentions in these areas. END COMMENT.

MILES